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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #0951 12/21/07

~ Merry X-mas To Readers ~ People Are Talking! ~ IE 8 Beta In 2008!
~ All-In-One Printers! ~ Click-To-Give Charity! ~ Worm Hits Orkut!
~ Life Without Computers ~ OLPC Heralds New Era! ~ New Firefox Beta!

~ Anti-Social Parodies! ~ Atari BBS News Update! ~ Felon Became COO!

-* Text Messaging In Politics? *-
-* Americans Googling Themselves More! *-
-* Popular Apple Rumor Web Site To Shut Down! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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I'm telling ya, we're not even at the official beginning of winter yet, but we've had three snow storms within a week. White Christmas, Bah, Humbug! We have almost two feet of snow on the ground already. Yes, it's a winter wonder land, if you're into that kind of thing. Personally, I could do without most of it (the snow)!

So, here we are, the next-to-last issue of 2007. Nine years of doing A-ONE - wow! It's hard to imagine another year almost under our belts, much less nine of 'em! But, here we are.

Before I forget, all of us here at A-ONE want to wish all of you, our faithful readers, a happy holiday season. Regardless of which holiday you celebrate, or even if you don't, we hope that it's a great one. Personally, I'm looking forward to watching my wife and two dogs rip into the Hanukkah gifts that I helped Hanukkah Harry deliver; and naturally, the ones that Ole' St, Nick will bring as well. And yes, I can't wait to use my new digital camera (yeah, I sneaked a peek!!). It won't be long now!

I know that I usually take a moment at the end of each year to thank all of you, our faithful readers, for your support over the past year, and years. And, I will likely expand upon that next week. But one thing I don't always remember to do, especially at this time of the year, is to tank those folks who help put A-ONE together each and every week, and those who help out behind the scenes - either by supporting our web site and mailings, or regularly sending along bits of news throughout the year. So, thanks to Joe Mirando and his People Are Talking column and various other support functions; Rob Mahlert and his support of our web site and more; TJ Andrews for his occasional columns; Peter West (in the UK) for his keeping me on my toes regarding weekly mailing problems!; and Fred Horvat, one of our loyal readers, who routinely points out a variety of news articles that might interest our readers. And there are others, I'm sure, whom I'm neglecting to remember at the moment. Without all of you, A-ONE would have likely faded away into the sunset years ago. So, thanks!

Please have a safe and joyous holiday. Be careful and drive safely (and don't drink and drive!). Enjoy being with friends and family. Seasons Greetings from all of us here at A-ONE!

Until next time...

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Atari BBS News Update

Some interesting BBS news... this is just to catch you up so that you can go into the BBS's without having to dig for this and can therefore just jump in....

1) Boot Factory sysop Abdul
(Atari 8-bit BBS, emulation, ATASCII option)
Running well. Marius (of the fifth BBS to be mentioned here) mentioned thinking about selling his Atari equipment on the message base here. I really hope he didn't.

GAMES ON THE BOOT FACTORY
1. Blackjack
2. Rule Prometheus! (Kingdom)
3. Pro-Zee
4. Keno!
5. Life Expectancy
-. Coal Mines of Midlothian (Selectable from main menu ATASCII needed)

2) Inside The Atari 8 Bit sysop Steve
(Atari 8-bit BBS, Real equipment, ATASCII option)
Up and going. Been a little activity on the first message base. The game menu does not seem to be active at this time. However this BBS is known for being possibly multi-channel, so you can have more than one user on at a time, and this is run on the real equipment. Good ANSI screens and menus too for the non-Atari user getting on this one.

3) Mousenet BBS
(Atari 8-bit BBS, Real Equipment?, ATASCII option)
"11-04-07 BBS Crash"
"sh*t happens, the BBS was crashed the last days and killed all the Boardfiles and my Boot partition. The userist was not deleted. not I have installed an older Backup from 10-03-07 (only the Boardfiles on Partition 5)"
When I checked the message base was not letting me post. So if someone could please let the sysop know if you know him.

MOUSENET has ATASCII cartoons and ASCII picture galleries.

4) Darkforces
(Atari ST BBS run on a Mega ST 2)
UDS-10 (Serial to Ethernel adaptor) is down. Will be back up when a replacement comes.

DARKFORCES, when it comes back up, is a great ST BBS that has a variety of message areas, and many online games. More on this soon.

5) Atari 8-bit Inside (Marius' BBS)
(Atari 8-bit BBS run on the real hardware)
See the first entry for the Boot Factory. Possibly down for good.
icon_sad.gif

6) ST Guild Chuck B

(ST BBS run on... ???)
telnet://stguild-bbs.dydns.org/
On Thu, 25 Oct 2007 22:16:19 -0400, Chuck B wrote:
> I have had some problems with over the last few months. I and had to
  shut it
> down. But if you want I will put it back up right now!! I am going to
  see
> how things go for a month so give it a try.

Will have to see if he is willing to give this another go. Posted a message on the Atari ST newsgroups to see what the plans are. Hopefully Chuck will reply.

7) Closer To Home Tom Hunt
(Atari 8 bit BBS run under emulation, ATASCII option)

This long time BBS has been basically up for forever. It has spells where it is down while family uses the computer, so who knows on this one. There is a discussion about Tom Hunt’s work here.

8) The Grove BBS
(Atari ST BBS run under emulation.)
Telnet://shadow.skeleton.org
(Type BBS and then nothing for the password)

Just got on this BBS the other day, looks really promising.

Here are the games...
1. Assassin
2. Galactic Empire 2.41
3. Final Frontier 1.53
4. Space Trader Elite
5. Mount NevereST Trivia
6. Cows 9.0
7. Super Star Trek
8. Death
9. Air Defence 3.8
10. Moria/ST
11. DDST (AD&D ST)
12. Pirate Adventure
13. Ghost Town Adventure
14. Blackjack
15. James Bond: World Domination
16. Trivial Pursuit

PLEASE if you know of any BBS’s that are up that are not listed, please let me know ASAP as we are adjusting the BBS list at telnet://rdfig.net (again x at the main menu for internet, then A for Atari, then select the Atari BBS on the list. There are broken links, this will be all updated completely soon).

Also don’t forget the Atari IRC chat starting at 8 pm CST. (I’ll be a late arrival, but plan to be there eventually.)

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|Doctor Clu / | \

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho-ho-ho, friends and neighbors. Well, here we stand at the ’edge’ of the year, like standing a right next to that dark area on some huge old-fashioned map, where they used to write "beyond this place there be dragons" because no one knew for sure what was in those regions.

That’s kind of what the end of the year is like, and for the past 51 weeks I’ve been watching the numbers of the A-ONE mag issues increase, one number per week, until we find ourselves here with only one number to go. And what awaits us on the other side of the year? Nobody knows. But one thing is for sure, the coming year is going to have a way to go to be as... ummm... interesting, yeah, that’s the word: Interesting... as this past year has been.

Another thing I want to mention is that it’s time again for all of us who are able to donate what we can to our local food-share, soup kitchen, shelter or church organization. I know that for many of us it’s been a lean year, and I expect the situation to continue for a while longer yet but, let’s face it, we’ve all still got it pretty good. I doubt that there are many reading this who cannot spare a little something to donate.

It doesn’t have to be a fortune or a feast. Fortunes and feasts are made up of bits and pieces just like anything else. All you need to do is a little... a can of cranberry sauce, a bag of stuffing, a couple of bucks... whatever you can spare.

I’m not going to tell the story again of how Harry Chapin dope-smacked me about donating. I’m sure that anyone who’d be interested has already heard the story several times. But in brief, I got a chance to meet Harry Chapin during the intermission of one of his concerts, and proudly told him that I’d taken his advice and made a donation to a local shelter. He burst my bubble by telling me that it wasn’t enough to do it once a year and sit back for the other 51 weeks and feel like I’d just solved all the world’s problems. There’s a need all year long, 52 weeks a year.

Well, ya know what? He was right. But it’s only recently that I’ve come to think that he was talking more about the way we think and act than about what and when we donate. This past year has hammered home to me the importance of the phrase, "There but for the grace of God go I".

Oh! One other thing I want to mention... if you’re an avid reader of this column, first of all, you really need to raise your standards some... but second, you may remember that last year I kind of went off on a rant about the great "’Happy Holidays’ versus ’Merry Christmas’" argument, and about "holiday trees" and all that other silliness.

Well, just the other day I heard someone (and someone who's supposed to know these things, to boot) say that you should just use the greeting or phrase that has the most meaning to you. If you're a Baptist, Episcopalian or Catholic, sure, go ahead and say "Merry Christmas". If you're a Jew, say "Happy Hanukkah". Simple, huh?

It warms my heart to hear this... particularly since I said the same thing (and with a good deal more flair) LAST YEAR! See that? I'm a damned trend-setter! [grin]

So, to recap... if you're a Baptist or Episcopalian or Catholic and someone says "Happy Hanukkah" to you, don't take offense. If you're "religious enough" to take offense, you should also be religious enough to realize that this is the season for good will.. the season of miracles. Just smile and say "thank you" or "Happy Holidays" or whatever. Accept the greeting in the spirit in which it was intended. If you're not a Jew and someone says, "Happy Hanukkah", think about this: Someone just shared something very special and private with you. Accept it for the compliment that it is, and reply in kind. If you don't feel right saying it back to them, or if you don't want to chance annoying them by sharing YOUR beliefs with them, just smile and say "thank you". You'd be surprised at how far a smile and a warm word will go, even these days.

If I remember correctly, I was kind of gruff last year on the subject of rebuffing a seasonal greeting like "Happy Hanukkah" by saying something like, "I'm a Christian" (I particularly like the ones that feel the need to draw it out..."Wull... I'm a kriss-chin..". You may find this hard to believe, but I'm still a hard-liner on the subject...

If you can't reply graciously just keep your mouth shut! They didn't ask you what religion you were. They offered you a greeting as a friend and brother. If you can't accept the greeting and compliment, then just shut your piehole and smile.

And if you're Muslim or Hindu or Sikh or anything else, just bear in mind that these greetings are not some kind of "Good Ol' Boys' Club" that you're excluded from. If there's a holiday that's special to you just around the corner (or even just passed), feel free to share that with me. Any good person will accept it in the spirit in which it was intended.

Okay, I need to get to the news stuff, so let me just recap and get it over with.

Just remember: It's okay to share your greetings with someone else. And we're ALL 'someone else' when you come right down to it. Take a few minutes this holiday season to try to be the person you want everyone to believe you are. Got it?

There. Done. That was ALMOST painless, wasn't it? [grin] Okay, let's get to the news, hints tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
==========

Robert Bernardo posts this slew of information and links from Jack Tramiel's appearance at the Computer History Museum:

"From Cameron Kaiser

References trimmed.

A rough cut should be up shortly at

http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=504862715223996474&hl=en

I just noticed two typos while scanning the cut. I mistakenly rigged
the date as 12/11 (not 12/10), and it should be Monte Sereno, not Mount.
This is what you get for trying to do this quickly, but it takes about
nine hours to render, transcode and upload, so people can just deal
with that for now.

The quality of the video is not very good because I had only a single
camera, there was audience activity I could not always get, and there
were glitches in the PA system. Robert's two camera video will
undoubtedly be better, so I am not going to lose a lot of sleep over
it.

Whoa! Thanks to Al Kossow for telling this... the Impact of
the Commodore 64 event, filmed by the Computer History Museum,
is now available, along with many other videos, at
http://youtube.com/computerhistory

For those who want to go exactly to the event video, it is at
http://youtube.com/watch?v=NBvbsPNBIyk

Thanks to Larry Anderson for following up on this...
the Computer History Museum now has the video of the
event at their website, in addition to the same one being
at YouTube. The CHM website video is downloadable
and of higher quality than that of the one at YouTube.
Go to:
http://www.computerhistory.org/events/index.php?id=1193702785
and click on Full Lecture."

If you all haven't seen them, 9 more photos are available,
starting at:
http://content.techrepublic.com.com/2346-10877_11-179806-5.html

Also Jack Tramiel is interviewed at:
http://www.news.com/The-man-behind-the-Commodore-64/2008-1042_3-6222406.html "

Djordje Vukovic writes to tell us about the latest version of TeraDesk:

"Version 3.94 of TeraDesk open-source desktop for the 16-bit and 32-bit
lines of Atari computers is available at:
      http://solair.eunet.yu/~vdjole/teradesk.htm

This release brings several improvements to existing features, including
new capabilities related to shutdown, special applications and display
of the hypertext help. It also fixes a number of bugs noticed since the
previous release. See the history file for more information.

By the way, it is almost exactly four years since the release of
TeraDesk 3.0 on December 14th 2003... "

Roger Burrows asks about the Riebl VME Ethernet card:

"I’m curious if anyone (else) has measured the throughput of their Riebl card. Running the MintNet ftp client to the FileZilla ftp server on a Windoze system, I get around 100 kbytes/sec for PC->TT, and 85 kbtes/sec for TT->PC. This is for files of a "reasonable" size, around 10MB. It seems to be slower than the Daynaport SCSI/Link, which is a bit surprising (to me at least). Comments welcome!"

Uwe Seimet tells Roger:

"When transferring a file of 11 MB from my Linux PC to a TT with a Riebel card (also running under Linux) I get transfer rates between 220 and 250 KB/s from PC to TT and a rate of 380 KB/s from TT to PC."

Roger replies:

"Thanks for the feedback, Uwe! The board is obviously capable of high rates - in fact IIRC 4Mbits/sec is about the maximum to be expected on a 10Mbps ethernet, so your performance is pretty good. Sounds like either a MintNet or driver problem ... perhaps I should take a look at the Linux drivers and see if they’re doing anything noticeably different when talking to the hardware."

Roger then thinks about it a bit and says:

"The first place I should have looked was in the mirror. I was doing a transfer to the root directory which (I believe) is not on a regular disk in MiNT. When I changed to a normal directory, in this case in a FAT filesystem, I got transfer rates of 285 kbytes/sec for PC->TT, 300 kbytes/sec for TT->PC, which is a lot closer to what I expected.

But I did turn up something (slightly) interesting in the MintNet driver: it’s only using 4 transmit buffers, whereas there’s space for 8 (and that’s how many the Linux driver uses). One of these days I must try playing with that ..."

Michael Schwingen jumps in and tell Roger:

"Maybe for a Riebl card - 10Mbps ethernet is capable of just a bit less than 10Mbps - I have regularly seen 800KB/s TCP throughput on ISA PC cards, and more than 1MB/s on SUN and PCI-based PC hardware. The theoretical maximum is for back-to-back frames without collisions, backoff delay and header overhead is 1250KB/s, so 1100KB/s TCP throughput is a good result."

Roger tells Michael:

"You’re right, I was having a nap. Now I think about it some more, I believe I saw the 4Mbits/sec number quoted as the approximate total throughput when you have many multiple transfers going on concurrently, with collisions & resulting backoffs. A straight ftp with no other traffic is of course not much like that."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week for our final issue of the year. I can't promise anything earth-shaking or special but, hey, it's the last issue of the year.

'Till then, keep your ears open so you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'The Witcher' Demo Download!
"Hidden Object" Series
Auction of Videogame Sparks
Online Debate! And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

'The Witcher' Downloadable Demo Available Now

Atari, Inc., announced the launch of the playable demo for The Witcher, the acclaimed first game from Polish development studio CD Projekt RED and a distinctive PC role-playing game which delivers a thrilling story in a unique fantasy universe alongside stunning tactical combat. The Witcher is a Games for Windows title, rated M for Mature and available at the suggested retail price of $49.95. The demo can be downloaded at various file-sharing sites such as GameSpot.com, GameDaily.com, FileFront.com, FileShack.com, Gamershell.com and Worthplaying.com.

Giving players a tantalizing taste of the world of The Witcher, the demo begins with the first part of the prologue in which the seeds of the epic story are sown and the white haired witcher Geralt learns the fundamentals of combat. The prologue is followed by the entirety of Act 1, during which Geralt of Rivia will see the first threads of the story weave their web around him and be called upon to slay man and beast to stay alive and earn his keep.

In The Witcher players take the role of Geralt of Rivia, a professional monster slayer who exists on the fringes of a complex society afflicted by the kind of problems more commonly found on the front pages of newspapers than in a fantasy universe. Taken as a child, mutated and trained in the arcane ways of the witchers, Geralt is a reluctant hero, who nonetheless finds himself all too frequently in the heat of battles

that are not his own. His is a path he might not choose to walk, but walk it he must, guided by his head, heart and only faithful companion - his sword.

Based on the fictional world created by best-selling Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, The Witcher is set in a unique fantasy universe where real-life issues dominate a troubled society. In this world there is no right or wrong, only decisions and consequences.

The Witcher is available now at retailers across North America as a standard game pack and as a Limited Edition containing exclusive content. For more information about The Witcher visit www.thewitcher.com and for more details about Atari's entire product line up visit www.atari.com.

"Hidden Object" Series Hit for Holidays

Glance at a recent computer game sales chart and you'll see that nestled between the typical combat and science fiction titles lies something a little different.

That would be "Mystery Case Files: Ravenhearst," which was the third-best-selling PC title in the United States for the week ending in the annual Black Friday shopping splurge.

Gamers who got lost in super-realistic fare like "Call of Duty 4" and "Crysis" may scratch their heads, but a growing number of casual players will nod knowingly at the mention of the leading example of the "hidden object" genre.

"Hidden object" titles are virtual scavenger hunts in which players hunt for items against minutely detailed backdrops, often racing to beat a clock or reveal clues to an overarching mystery.

Seattle's Big Fish Games essentially defined the genre with the "Mystery Case Files" series two years ago. The company estimates that 100 million people have at least sampled trial versions of the games since then.

The fourth installment, "Madame Fate," launched last month for download on Big Fish's Web site, sold 100,000 copies in six weeks - big numbers for a casual game.

Unlike a hard-core game franchise like "Call of Duty" where each sequel overshadows its predecessors, the debut of the new "Mystery Case Files" title rekindled interest in past games. Hence the strong retail sales of "Ravenhearst," the third title in the series.

"When it hits retail during the holidays, people recognize the brand and buy it," Big Fish founder Paul Thelen said in an interview.

"Our best guess - we don't have actual data - is that it's people who have played or bought 'Case Files' online and now, with the holiday coming, they want to give that to friends or relatives," Thelen said.

Another difference between "Mystery Case Files" and a big title for a gaming console like Sony's PlayStation 3 is that a big console game usually makes a splashy debut and then sees sales taper off.

Big Fish, however, gets more mileage out of "Mystery Case Files" by first posting it for download and then offering it more broadly in shops and on other Web sites several months later, which leads to a second spike in sales.

The first game took about six months to program, but Big Fish, not wanting to rush what it sensed could be a hit, spent more than twice as long before that polishing the design.

"We initially came up with concepts that didn’t work well. At first it was a kids’ game, and that didn’t work well with audiences," Thelen said.

Big Fish has cranked out four "Mystery Case Files" games in two years, but that pace is set to slow a bit as developers get more ambitious.

"We would like to get one out every year because it is episodic," said Paul Handelman, head of business development for Big Fish. "We are really trying to think of ways to bring the whole brand together."

Like all success stories, "Mystery Case Files" has spawned ranks of imitators, and even Big Fish has rolled out other hidden object games, such as its "Hidden Expedition" series, and a new one featuring 3D, 360-degree scenes in London.

"Mystery Case files" mainly appeal to women aged 35 to 50, but a mobile version launching in partnership with Glu Mobile next year should appeal to younger players who are more likely to play games on their phones.

"We’re pushing the limits in terms of what has ever been done on mobile, in terms of the graphics quality, use of the networks, and game design," Handelman said.

Auction of Videogame Sparks Online Debate

A Canadian man who said he sold his 15-year-old son’s prized video game on eBay after catching him smoking marijuana has sparked an online debate on who is wrong - father or son.

The unidentified man decided to punish his son by selling the popular and hard-to-find Guitar Hero III videogame he had bought him for Christmas for $90 on the auction site where an Australian buyer bid $9,100.

"I had finally got the Holy Grail of Xmas presents pretty much just in the nick of time. I couldn’t wait to spread the jubilance to my son," the father said in a letter accompanying the posting on eBay.

"Then, yesterday, I came home from work early and what do I find? My innocent little boy smoking pot in the backyard with two of his delinquent friends."

The seller, who describes himself as an elementary school teacher, said that by selling the game he intended to teach his son a lesson.

The five-day auction that ended on Dec 10 elicited more than a hundred comments, some siding with the disgruntled father and others who accused him of "publicly humiliating" his son.

The father has since updated the posting with more responses to the feedback, including accusations that the sale was a hoax.

"All I can do is assure you that yes, the auction is real," he said on the site.

No one from eBay was available to comment.

"I am still considering getting him a game for his Nintendo. Maybe something like Barbie ...," the father added.

MTV, Bruckheimer To Launch Game Studio

Viacom Inc's MTV and award-winning television and film producer Jerry Bruckheimer will launch a video game development studio, marrying Hollywood and technology in what has been historically an uneasy alliance.

Bruckheimer, producer of Walt Disney Co's wildly successful "Pirates of the Caribbean" film franchise among a long list of film and TV hits like "CSI," said he plans to do for video games what he has done for other well-defined genres of content.

"It's no different than what we did with movies," he said in a phone interview. "We did 'Top Gun' when everyone said you couldn't do an aviation movie because they all failed. We did a pirate movie when they said pirate movies aren't going to work."

Bruckheimer added, "We approach gaming the same way. We see things a little differently, that maybe other people wouldn't see."

MTV Networks earmarked over $500 million earlier this year to invest in video games, including this venture, for its more than 300 Web sites and on game systems of Sony Corp, Microsoft Corp and Nintendo Co Ltd's.

Its success with the recently launched "Rock Band" music-based game has inspired MTV to explore other new categories untapped by the $30 billion global video games market.

Rather than shoehorn Bruckheimer into creating games for existing genres, such as shooters or extreme sports, the new studio aims to break new ground in interactive storytelling on the Internet, computers and video game systems, said Van Toffler, president of MTV Networks' Music and Logo Group.

The teaming up of Hollywood and the games industry has met with mixed success in the past.

Hong Kong action film director John Woo's "Stranglehold," a video game sequel to his movie "Hard Boiled," and the Wachowski brothers "Matrix" series of games have not been breakout hits like the blockbuster films they were based on.

Moreover, the video games industry has also begun to scale back the licensing of movie properties for games as development budgets soar.

"These are for original games for MTV Games and it is our hope that some

of this IP (intellectual property) and characters will migrate to TV and film," MTV Networks President Van Toffler said in an interview.

Left unanswered is how big of a budget the new studio will have at its disposal. Top tier games such as Microsoft's "Halo 3" and Activision Inc's "Call of Duty 4" command budgets of anywhere from $20 million to well over $30 million, according to one game industry veteran.

Media executives including those at Time Warner Inc, which has invested in video games, are eyeing the potential rewards. "Halo 3" sales, for example, topped $170 million within 24 hours of its release and $300 million globally in the first week.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Click-To-Give Holiday Gift of Charity

Feeling light in the wallet but generous of heart this holiday season? You can still benefit your favorite cause - without spending a dime - via a host of fun and easy Web sites.

Among the most popular charity sites is Free Rice (www.freerice.com), with some 500,000 daily visitors looking to play word games and at the same time donate food for the hungry. Sponsors, who run advertisements on the site, pay for the food.

Free Rice is the brainchild of computer programmer John Breen, who came up with the idea of a vocabulary game to help his son prepare for college entrance exams. Breen later decided the game could also be used to help charities and teamed up with the United Nations World Food Program (WFP).

Here's how it works: A word pops up on the home page of the site, with four short definitions listed below. When you click on the right answer, 20 grains of rice are donated to the WFP by the site's advertisers.

So far, more than 10 billion grains have been donated.

"We get phone calls all day long about the site. People love it, they are delighted by it," said Bettina Luescher, a WFP spokeswoman. "A school child can play this game and a nuclear scientist can play this game."

Those who want to skip the word games have plenty of other click-to-give charities to choose from, including The Animal Rescue Site (www.theanimalrescuesite.com), a partner of Petfinder.com.

Each time a visitor clicks on a large purple rectangle on the right-hand side of the Web site, a donation is made to provide food and shelter for unwanted animals. It also tells you how much was donated with your click - and the entire operation is sponsor-funded.

"This is money out of nowhere," said Lisa Halstead, chief operating officer of CharityUSA.com, which runs the site. "This is money that people are contributing because they're willing to take quick action."

You can shop their on-line store for jewelry, clothing and accessories, with up to 30 percent of the proceeds going to the cause. Gift packages include everything from feeding a rescued wild horse ($22) to paying a teacher's salary in Afghanistan ($40).

As part of a broader network run by CharityUSA.com, breast cancer, child health, literacy, hunger and protecting endangered habitat such as the rainforest also have links to sites on which you can click to give.

"We get a lot of feedback from people thanking us," said Halstead, adding that they also receive many inquiries about how the system works.

Meanwhile, some corporations are getting into the act, moving away from fruit cakes, mouse pads, and desk calendars as gifts for business contacts during the holidays.

Take marketing company NSI, which last year came up with an idea to send "Joy of Giving" holiday cards to clients, staff and vendors with a link to its seasonal Web site.

Once there, the "Joy of Giving" card recipient can click on one of 10 charities, including the American Cancer Society, Make-A-Wish donation to the charities depending on the number of clicks each one received.

NSI Chief Executive Mark Montavani said the response this year had been even better than in 2006 from the roughly 1,000 card recipients.

"I've never heard anything but positive response. I think people really like to be included," he said. "The bottom line is it's nice to be able to do something that's a little bit different and in the spirit of the season."

If you want to donate to a charity but need assurance that your money is used in the best possible way, try one of the Web sites to help guide you. Charity Navigator (http://charitynavigator.org/), for example, rates charities and provides tips on everything from protecting yourself from scams to specific questions to ask before donating.

msg 2 candidates: u get more votes with txt

Text messaging is playing a growing role in the 2008 presidential race as a handful of candidates look to the technology to reach younger voters often glued to their mobile phones.

The three leading Democratic candidates - Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards - are providing "mobile updates" to supporters who choose to receive SMS or short message service updates on their cell phones.

Political observers say that although this technology has been available for a number of years, its use as an organizing tool has been demonstrated in other countries: some say text messages helped fuel

rallies that led to the ouster of Philippine president Joseph Estrada in 2001; and it may have tipped the balance in the 2004 elections in Spain as a "viral" messaging campaign got out the vote.

In the United States, some say this potential has yet to be tapped for political campaigns, which already use a variety of technologies such as email, websites, blogs and online videos.

Industry figures showed 158 billion text messages were sent in 2006 between Americans, who own some 243 million mobile phones. About 43 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in the US text daily, according to Insight Express, as do 10 percent of the 55- to 64-year-old generation.

"It could be an incredibly useful mobilization tool," says Julie Germany, deputy director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University.

The use of text messaging "is catching on little bit in the US but text messaging in this country is nowhere near as big as it is in places like Europe, Latin America and Asia."

Aaron Strauss, a Princeton University graduate student who has researched technology and elections, said savvy candidates are looking to SMS to reach younger voters whose participation has been disappointing in recent years.

Strauss said his study showed that persons who received a text message reminder ahead of an election were about four percent more likely to vote than those who did not.

"The newest generation of voters is starting use text messaging and as they become politically active I think you'll see text messaging become more important in campaigns," he said.

Mobile phone users can text for updates to Obama (62262), Clinton (77007) or Edwards (30644).

"By harnessing the power of text messaging, we can engage voters in the political process using the latest technology and provide personalized, local campaign updates to our supporters nationwide," Clinton said in a statement on the launch of her service.

Julie Ask, analyst at JupiterResearch, said Obama appeared to have an early edge in using mobile technology, with a snappier code - 62262 spells Obama, for example - and with mobile content and "wallpaper" for phones.

She said candidates should not assume that only young voters will be moved by text. "I would remind (candidates) that the percentage of cellphone users ages 55 and over using text messaging doubled last year," Ask said.

But analysts say the United States is not ready for the "smart mobs" created by SMS such as in the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, or around the 2002 South Korean elections. Some say text messaging did help organizers in the 1999 anti-globalization protests in Seattle, Washington.

Americans are less frequent text messagers because they use email more frequently and because mobile operators charge 10 to 15 cents per

message, which can make it costly for frequent users, say analysts.

So far Republican candidates have yet to use mobile messaging, but some activist groups, including environmentalists and organizations on both sides of the abortion debate, have used SMS to help get out the vote.

Julie Germany said text message campaigns are most effective when they become "viral," or spread from one person to another, instead of a single message sent to thousands from a campaign headquarters.

"Messages spread from friend to friend, person to person and have an immediate action attached to them are the most effective," she said.

Justin Oberman, a mobile marketing consultant who has advised political candidates, said text messaging can help campaigns broaden their reach.

"You will reach about 10 percent more people, people you won't get by mail or other traditional methods, but you have to hold onto them," he said.

Oberman said mobile messaging may not be a critical element in the current race but may be at some point in the future.

"It's going to happen, maybe not this year, but it's going to happen in a way even the campaign doesn't expect," he said.

Felon Became COO of Wikipedia Foundation

The foundation that runs - and accepts donations for - the online encyclopedia Wikipedia neglected to do a basic background check before hiring a chief operating officer who had been convicted of theft, drunken driving and fleeing a car accident.

Before she left in July, Carolyn Bothwell Doran, 45, had moved up from a part-time bookkeeper for the Wikimedia Foundation and spent six months as chief operating officer, responsible for personnel and financial management. In March, she signed the small nonprofit's tax return, which listed more than $1.3 million in donations.

At the time, she was on probation for a 2004 hit-and-run accident in Virginia that had landed her seven months in prison. Doran had multiple drunken-driving convictions, and records show earlier run-ins for theft, writing bad checks and wounding her boyfriend with a gunshot to the chest.

The revelation comes as the Wikimedia Foundation, which runs the volunteer-written Wikipedia and its sister Web encyclopedias in other languages, is staging a fundraising drive and trying to expand beyond a ragtag startup.

"This is indicative of poor management of the Wikimedia Foundation," said Charles Ainsworth, a frequent Wikipedia contributor. Ainsworth said he had been considering donating to support the encyclopedia, but won't "unless they clearly get things fixed."

The foundation said it had no indication Doran did anything improper with donors' money. However, the organization's most recent audit is

incomplete, despite a goal of completing it months ago.

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, who is on Wikimedia's board, said he did not expect to find anything amiss but would personally cover any losses that turned up.

"We are very saddened and hurt by these shocking revelations," Wales wrote in a message to the Wikipedia community. "Of course we are doing soul searching about what we could have done different."

Doran's background was reported first in The Register, a London-based technology Web site. The Associated Press independently examined Doran's record.

On May 20, while she was still with Wikimedia in St. Petersburg, Fla., police arrested Doran for another DUI and driving with a suspended license. She was released on bond that day. In August, a month after she left Wikimedia, she was arrested for violating probation on the 2004 hit-and-run. She was extradited to Virginia and has been jailed there.

Her attorney did not return messages seeking comment.

Wikimedia leaders said they knew nothing of her past until the Register story broke last week.

She had been sent by a temporary agency in 2006 and worked part time as Wikimedia's bookkeeper. Soon after, Wikimedia's board voted 6-1 to promote her to chief operating officer.

Even partial details she shared in the office hinted at a complex tale.

Danny Wool, a former Wikimedia staffer who described Doran as personable, stylish and funny, recalled that she revealed being the daughter of a CIA official. That is supported by a 1992 Washington Post obituary on the CIA's James Bothwell, listing daughter Carolyn Bothwell as a survivor.

Doran also had a picture on her desk of her late husband - intelligence officer Sean Doran, a former CIA employee and Air Force major who drowned on their honeymoon in the Cayman Islands in 1999.

There had been other trouble she didn't talk about, such as the 1989 shooting of her then-boyfriend, the father of her son. Bothwell allegedly had been beaten by the boyfriend and received probation after he asked that the case be dropped.

Bothwell also popped up in 1995, when a former roommate was accused of poisoning a man for insurance money. Bothwell worked with investigators to secretly record incriminating conversations with the ex-roommate. Defense attorneys countered that she helped authorities so she could win leniency in a pending credit-card forgery case.

Even when Doran was originally appointed chief operating officer, the post was considered temporary, until Wikimedia found a new executive director. The foundation, which is moving from Florida to San Francisco, has been growing from just a handful of employees as it tries to solidify its operations.

Because of that development and not because of Doran, Wikimedia now is working with a background checking agency, said Mike Godwin, who

recently joined the foundation as general counsel.

So far, the project’s core supporters appear forgiving.

Philip Greenspun, a computer scientist who recently gave the foundation $20,000, said he wasn’t surprised the foundation would stumble on a background check, something that "isn’t core to their mission."

"I would be more dismayed," he said, "by a lengthy server outage."

Stand-Alone Printers Giving Way to All-In-Ones

Sales of stand-alone ink-jet printers are fading fast, replaced by popular "all-in-one" printers that usually combine a printer, copier and scanner.

Prices have fallen so dramatically that all-in-ones are often priced on par with or below single-function printers, and consumers feel they’re getting more for their money. Manufacturers are offering price cuts to help spur holiday sales.

For consumers, buying an all-in-one is like "getting a scanner for free," says Colin Donahoe, director of the consumer ink-jet division at printer manufacturer Epson.

Scanners aren’t just for making high-resolution copies of old photos. You can also use them to make digital copies of receipts and important documents such as passports and tax returns. Once digitized, they can be stored on hard drives and shared in e-mails.

The Epson RX595, a printer/copier/scanner that sold for $149.95 in September when it launched, is now discounted to $99 in many promotions.

A multifunction printer/copier/scanner from market leader Hewlett-Packard is on sale at Best Buy for $75 - less than a stand-alone printer cost a year ago.

Lexmark’s X5470, which also includes a fax function, is selling for $89.99 at Target.

Most popular all-in-ones offer "photo" quality printing, with six ink cartridges for more colorful prints, instead of the four colors used on most stand-alone printers.

In the first three quarters of 2007, some 17.6 million ink-jet printers have sold - 12.3 million all-in-ones, compared with 5.3 million single-function printers, according to researcher Gartner.

That compares with sales of 17 million in the first three quarters of 2006 - 10.5 million all-in ones and 6.5 million stand-alone printers.

Multifunction printers now have 74% of the market, up from 66% at the beginning of the year, says Gartner.

The drop-off in sales of single-function printers is so dramatic that Donahoe predicts they could eventually disappear.

"I see them pretty much going away within the next two years," he says.

Manufacturers prefer selling multifunction units, which run through ink more frequently as consumers use them for color printing, scanning and copying, says Gartner (IT) analyst Federico De Silva. "This way, (manufacturers) make more money on ink sales, where the real money is," he adds.

Printing manufacturers historically have used the razor/razor blade approach - selling cheap printers, with expensive and highly profitable ink. Color ink refills often cost nearly as much as a new printer.

The scanning quality on early all-in-one printers was inferior to stand-alone scanners, but Donahoe says that’s changed.

Professional photographers, architects and other creative professionals will "still want a (separate) scanner, to make wall-size copies," he says. "But for the mass market, the scans they get on the multifunctions are perfectly good."

De Silva says consumers might have a hard time finding single-function printers in 2008, though he believes they will remain available for awhile. "There’s always a need for the low end of the market," he says.

Microsoft To Release IE 8 Beta 1 in First Half of 2008

Microsoft plans to release the first beta of the next version of Internet Explorer in the first half of 2008 and said Wednesday that IE 8 has passed a key Web standards test that ensures the browser won’t "break" the Web.

IE8 has passed the "Acid2 Browser Test" from the Web Standards Project, which shows whether a browser renders a Web site in a certain way. If the browser renders the site correctly, it means the browser supports certain accepted Web standards.

Microsoft posted a video about the browser passing the test on its Channel 9 Web site.

Microsoft developed IE before some Web standards, such as CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and RSS, were developed, and so older versions don’t support some current standards. Developers would write applications to work with IE rather than to support Web standards because the browser was the de facto standard for surfing the Internet for so many years. Microsoft also was lax in updating IE to meet the demands of Web standards because there was little competition in the browser market for years.

With the release and subsequent popularity of open-source browser Mozilla Firefox three years ago, a browser’s need to stay current with Web standards once again moved to the forefront. When Microsoft developed IE7, released in October 2006, the company had good intentions and decided to improve support of Web standards with the new release.

However, Web sites that were created for older versions of IE didn’t work properly on IE7. Microsoft hopes to remedy this problem so the situation is not repeated with IE8, according to an IE Blog posting attributed to

Dean Hachamovitch, a Microsoft general manager on the IE team.

"With respect to standards and interoperability, our goal in developing Internet Explorer 8 is to support the right set of standards with excellent implementations and do so without breaking the existing Web," according to the blog posting.

Hachamovitch said Microsoft is taking a cue in lessons learned from making improvements to CSS in IE7 that "made IE more compliant with some standards and less compatible with some sites on the Web as they were coded." The key design goal for IE8, he said, is compatibility with existing Web sites and Web standards supported in other browsers to provide a premium user experience.

"As a developer, I'd prefer to not have to write the same site multiple times for different browsers," according to Hachamovitch's post. "Standards are a (critical!) means to this end, and we focus on the standards that will help actual, real-world interoperability the most. As a consumer and a developer, I expect stuff to just work, and I also expect backwards compatibility. When I get a new version of my current browser, I expect all the sites that worked before will still work."

Microsoft said the final release of IE8 depends upon feedback received from the beta process.

Mozilla Releases New Firefox 3 Beta

Mozilla rolled out its second beta release of Firefox 3 in less than a month with the goal of receiving feedback from developers on the browser's core functionality. The Beta 2 release now available for download features builds for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux in over 25 different languages.

"The next Milestone is Beta 3 scheduled for February," explained Mozilla vice president of engineering Mike Schroepfer. "We'll either do more betas or move to final release based on feedback from users and Web developers."

Mozilla is making several changes to Firefox that it hopes will compel more Internet users to try the free browser. For example, Firefox 3 sports improvements to the browser's look and feel, including a full page zoom capability, one-click bookmarking, and a location bar that matches against the user's history and bookmarks for URLs and page titles. In addition, Firefox 3's menus display using Vista's native theme.

Web-based applications, such as the user's favorite e-mail provider, can now be used instead of desktop applications such as Outlook for handling "mailto:" links. And a new keyword tag function allows Firefox users to sort their bookmarks by topic.

Users can resume downloads after restarting the browser or resetting their network connections. Or type in all or part of the title, tag, or address of a Web page to scan a list of matches from the browser's personalized history and bookmarks.

Firefox 3's security enhancements include antivirus integration in the download manager, version checking for insecure plug-ins, malware alerts,

and better presentation of Web site identity and security. The content of Web pages suspected to be forgeries is no longer shown. And bookmarks, history, cookies, and preferences are now protected from system crashes through storage in a new database format.

For its part, Microsoft says that its own next-generation browser, Internet Explorer 8, has passed the Web Standards Project's Acid2 test "of how modern browsers work with some specific features across several different Web standards," said Internet Explorer general manager Dean Hachamovitch. Showing the Acid2 page correctly is a good indication of IE8 "being standards compliant," he explained.

Microsoft plans to offer its first beta release of IE8 in the first half of 2008. "With respect to standards and interoperability, our goal in developing Internet Explorer 8 is to support the right set of standards with excellent implementations and do so without breaking the existing Web," Hachamovitch said.

Mozilla's Schroepfer pointed out that Firefox 3 first passed the Acid2 test a little over a year ago. "I look forward to verifying IE8 passing the Acid2 test whenever they decide to release a public version of it," he said.

While the general public awaits the arrival of both next-generation browsers on the desktop, Microsoft and Mozilla will continue their global battle over browser market share. Of particular interest is the fact that Firefox held a 20.4 percent share of the U.S. browser market in September - up from 18.9 percent in July, according to Xitimonitor.

Moreover, Mozilla's share of the South American market for September rose more than 2.5 percentage points over the prior month, the French consulting firm said. And Firefox has been growing its popularity in Australia/New Zealand and Europe, where the browser held September market shares of 30.3 percent and 27.7 percent, respectively.

OLPC Heralds Era of Low-Cost Computing

Critics of the One-Laptop-Per-Child (OLPC) Project like to point out that it has not yet lived up to its goal of putting US$100 notebooks in the hands of millions of kids in poor countries, but that's a short-sighted view considering the impact it's already having on the computer industry.

OLPC's XO laptop and the dream of the $100 notebook PC have driven down the cost of computing and highlighted the issue of the lack of computing resources in developing nations.

It has inspired an entirely new class of low-cost laptop, which already includes two rival devices in the Eee PC and Classmate PC and will have many more by the end of 2008, according to research company IDC. The laptop has also roused big technology companies to join the fray with research dollars and plans for the future.

Intel and Microsoft, for example, are hard at work tweaking chips (Diamondville) and software ($3 for XP, Office and a suite of additional software) for this low-cost segment of the laptop industry.

"There's a lot of potential, because everyone is looking at this market,"

said Richard Shim, research manager for personal computing at IDC.

A number of trends are occurring due to the low-cost laptop drive, he said. Prices are falling and companies are branching out with new laptop designs. The Eee PC, for example, is ultra-portable, weighing less than a kilogram and carrying a small, 7-inch screen.

Shim says he has already seen new low-cost laptops that have yet to be unveiled, and said "all the major guys" are looking into such devices, but he declined to reveal further information due to nondisclosure agreements.

To be sure, laptop PC prices were already falling prior to the launch of OLPC's XO laptop, said Rob Enderle, principal analyst at the Enderle Group. The proliferation of LCDs (liquid crystal displays) in laptops, desktop monitors and other devices has pushed down the price of such screens to below that of older, CRT (cathode-ray tube) monitors in some cases, and iPods and other digital music players have helped lower the price of hard disk drives and flash memory storage.

But the challenge OLPC Chairman Nicholas Negroponte raised a few years ago, to design a $100 laptop computer for kids in developing countries, crystalized the need for lower-cost computers and unleashed new energy for the effort, he added.

In microprocessors, for example, not only has Intel stepped up its efforts to lower costs and increase power efficiency, but other processor makers are challenging the company by winning designs in the low-cost area as well, including Via Technologies Inc.

The competition is prodding processor makers to improve their designs and lower prices, according to market researcher iSuppli. That's important because the microprocessor is normally the most expensive component in a computer, or second only to the LCD screen in some cases.

Ultra-low-cost mobile PCs are likely to have an impact on the component supply chain going forward, said Jamie Wang, computing analyst at Gartner. In addition, the average price of mainstream mobile PCs will probably be driven down to compete with the new breed of low-cost notebooks.

Still, people interested in buying a low-cost mobile device should beware, the analysts warned. In the electronics business, you often get what you pay for.

"You're making very severe trade-offs to get these costs," said Enderle. "You can't have too many trade-offs, or you lose the usefulness."

While products such as the XO and the Eee PC can be had for under $250, there are mainstream laptops with far better performance available for $500, he said.

There's also the problem of creating such devices for developing nations, where poor infrastructure such as a lack of electricity and Internet access make computing a far more difficult issue than just providing laptops, say Matt Wilkins and Peter Lin, analysts from iSuppli.

But the groups promoting low-cost laptops for developing countries are trying to take care of some of these infrastructure issues, and the devices could help narrow the digital divide in countries where

development is already in full swing and electricity and Internet connectivity are more available, such as India and China.

Enderle compared the XO to Volkswagen’s original Beetle, "a very plain, utilitarian vehicle that became iconic." It met a need for low-cost driving in the same way the XO and rivals will give people in developing countries a low-cost device for computing. It may not meet everyone’s needs right away, but it’s a good start.

For the rest of us, it will reduce computer prices.

Americans Googling Themselves More

A report released Sunday by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that growing numbers of Americans are searching for information about themselves and others on the Internet.

According to "Digital Footprints," nearly 50 percent of Americans have searched for themselves online, more than double the number who reported doing so in 2002. Even more people - 53 percent of those surveyed - said that they searched for information about acquaintances or business contacts.

In general, the Pew report found that younger users are more comfortable searching for information about themselves and others than older Internet users. Pew researchers found little difference in the frequency with which men and women searched for themselves online, but concluded that as education and income rise, so does the tendency of people to monitor their online profiles.

Not surprisingly, the Pew report found that a much higher percentage of teens (55 percent) than adults (20 percent) have created profiles of themselves on one of the social-networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook. But teens, the report also found, are much more likely to post information on their profile pages (particularly photos and videos) that adults would consider private.

"This gap between young people not caring about privacy, and older people caring more about privacy has existed over a long period of time," said Ari Schwartz, the deputy director of the Center for Democracy and Technology. "Younger people that just don’t have experiences of older people of information coming back to haunt them. And now technology gives them the opportunity to be more careless than they were in the past."

Somewhat surprisingly, teens were more cautious about who can view their social-networking information. Nearly 60 percent of teens restrict access to their Web 2.0 profiles to "friends."

The opposite is true for adults: some 60 percent make their social-networking profiles open to everyone. Schwartz suggested that the greater openness on the part of adults might be due in part to the fact that kids have a better grasp on how to use social-networking privacy tools.

The Pew report classifies nearly half of its survey respondents as "unfazed and inactive" - people who do not take any steps to limit or control the information about themselves that appears online, and do not

worry about what is available.

The Pew researchers defined three other groups of roughly equal size: the "confident creatives" (17 percent), who actively upload information and are not terribly worried about who sees it, but still take steps to limit who has access; "concerned and careful" (21 percent), people who are actively worried about what information is available and try to protect or limit their personal information; and "worried by the wayside" (18 percent), people who are worried about the amount of information available online, but don’t take any steps to try to control their personal information.

Schwartz said that it will take some time before researchers can determine how the privacy experiences of the new online generation will affect public policy. "We haven’t had enough time to really measure whether all of these people who are online so much have a stronger sense of privacy," he said. "That’s going to be the interesting question over time."

Computer-Free Students Find Life Hard Without Them

Caitlin Magnusson’s laptop was on the top shelf of her closet, sealed in flowery wrapping paper, covered in duct tape and caged in a box.

But every morning she would wake up in her dorm room and still turn to her desk to reach for it. It had become muscular memory.

Capturing the experience of going without a computer - for Magnusson it was five weeks - is part of a documentary-making course at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. She and two other students who went on the "computer fast" are the documentary subjects; eight others took turns filming. When the documentary is finished, they plan to screen it on campus and submit it to film festivals.

Magnusson, of Renton, Wash., and the rest of the class discovered the intense influence computers have on their lives. Ditching them entirely is impossible, says Mitchell Lundin of Lakeville, Minn., who also went computerless. Giving up e-mail, Internet news and social networking sites, and relying on phones and print newspapers, rapidly became a burden, he says.

About 87% of 18- to 29-year-olds use the Internet, according to a 2007 report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which studies Net use.

Those statistics reflect the perplexed looks and "You’re crazy" remarks that Magnusson, 20, Lundin, 22, and Andrew Tatge, 20, got from their peers. Each student set a goal for how long they would go computerless. Lundin went for three weeks. Tatge, of Des Moines, went four.

For Magnusson, the fast was a roller coaster of emotions. At first she was proud, but when she was forced to use a typewriter and skip out on watching YouTube videos with friends, she experienced deep frustration, she says.

Lundin, who had pitched the idea to the class, saw it as a means to sift out the unnecessary. He had used instant messaging since 7th grade

but now shuns it as "incredibly distracting."

Tatge is philosophical. "It hasn’t changed how I look at things, but it challenged who I am," he says. He filled his free time with campus walks and drawing comics in a journal.

When Lundin went to register for classes in person or when Magnusson had a meltdown the first time she used a typewriter, a cameraman from the class was with them. When the class asked the student body to abstain from computers for 24 hours and met to discuss it, the camera crew was there. The students spent most of this term filming. Next term will be focused on editing and post-production, says Melody Gilbert, their professor and "executive producer."

Schoolwork was especially challenging without a computer, the students found. Lundin says he felt guilty when he asked for special treatment from professors, who expected him to participate in online class discussions and check e-mail for last-minute updates. Tatge says he had to cheat once to complete an assignment for his Chinese class that required the computer. All three missed out on parties and campus events because they could not check Facebook and didn’t know what was going on.

Lundin says the class realized that "there is no turning back. The role of computers is steamrolling forward. You can resist it. You can hold off for a little bit. But in the end, it will keep moving forward with or without you."

Parody Sites Start Anti-Social Networking Trend

Tired of phony online friends? Make enemies instead. Riding on the popularity of social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, new Web sites are poking fun at online friendships that connect you to the people you like, by turning attention to the ones you don’t.

Over the past 18 months, sites such Snubster, Enemybook and Hatebook are appealing to Internet users who get a kick out of the tongue-in-cheek humor of mocking their friends and others who are just plain cynical.

"I didn’t understand these fake-friend war chests that people were so busy building online," said Bryant Choung, a technology consultant who started Snubster last year.

"I would get Facebook requests from people I talked to for three minutes at a bar or party, and now this person wants to go online to peruse all of my photos and contacts. I just didn’t get it," the 26-year-old added.

Snubster, a Facebook application and a Web site with 16,000 users worldwide, lets users compile people and things they dislike.

No one from Facebook, which boasts 59 million active users worldwide, was available to comment about the sites.

When Facebook opened up its network to outside applications earlier this year, some users decided it was an opportunity to poke fun at the phenomenon.

Kevin Matulef, the creator of Enemybook, said the idea for his Facebook application started as a joke last summer when friends at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were asking if someone was a real friend or a Facebook friend.

"It started basically as a satire, sort of a parody of some of the superficial aspects of Facebook and the connections that you have, but now it’s kind of evolved and it allows people to express themselves via their dislikes," said Matulef, 28.

Enemybook, which has 9,000 users, is similar to Snubster in that it lets you "enemy" so-called friends, public figures and fictitious characters.

"A lot of people like myself use it just to joke around with our good friends," said Matulef.

Choung agrees. "I hope that most people take it as a joke, on occasion I do get complaints from people about others who take it too seriously."

But Murray Pomerance, a professor of pop culture sociology at Ryerson University in Toronto, said most people take their online relationships very seriously.

"There are a lot of people who do not believe the friends that they have on these sites are phony," he explained.

"I know people who have lots and lots of friends on these sites and who say things about themselves on these sites that they would never say to anyone straight up in public or in private."

Pomerance added that any online social networking, whether it’s making friends or enemies, could be dangerous.

"Who you liked and who you hated used to be private," he said. "What they’re doing is taking human feeling and emotion and making us actually register them through these online services."

Popular Apple Rumor Web Site To Shut Down

Apple Inc and a popular Web site that published company secrets about the maker of the Mac computer, the iPhone and the iPod have reached a settlement that calls for the site to shut down.

Apple and the site, ThinkSecret.com, settled the suit, which Apple filed in January 2005, and no sources were revealed, Apple and ThinkSecret said in statements.

College student Nick Ciarelli, ThinkSecret’s publisher, said he plans to move on. He started the site at 13.

"I’m pleased to have reached this amicable settlement, and will now be able to move forward with my college studies and broader journalistic pursuits," he said in his statement.

Cupertino, California-based Apple filed its suit after ThinkSecret published details of a stripped-down Macintosh computer called the Mac mini two weeks before the product was launched formally.

"We are pleased to have reached this amicable settlement and happy to have this behind us," an Apple spokesman said.

Worm Hits Google’s Orkut

Google’s Orkut social networking site appeared to have been hit by a relatively harmless worm, but one that demonstrated the continuing vulnerability of Web applications.

Some Orkut users received an e-mail telling them they had been sent a new scrapbook entry - a type of Orkut message - on their profile from another Orkut user.

They only had to view their profile to become infected by the worm, which added them to an Orkut group, "Infectados pelo Virus do Orkut," wrote the blogger Kee Hinckley on his site TechnoSocial.

The name of the group, in Portuguese, roughly translates to "infected by the Orkut virus." Orkut is popular in Brazil, as well as India, but has not caught on as well outside those countries compared to MySpace and Facebook.

The description of the group reveals that the worm was designed to show Orkut could be dangerous to users even if they do not click on malicious links, Hinckley wrote. The worm apparently did not try to steal any personal data.

The worm was also noted by Orkut Plus, a site that offers Orkut security tips, and discussedin Google’s Orkut help group.

At one time the infected group was adding new members at a rate of 100 per minute, and had reached a few hundred thousand members, according to various postings, but the problem appears now to be fixed, Hinckley wrote.

Orkut’s scrapbook feature allows people post messages that contain HTML code, but it may lack a filter to strip out malicious JavaScript, Hinckley wrote.

"It does not appear at first glance that the worm does anything more dangerous than pass itself on to one or more of your friends," he wrote. "I think it unlikely that it would be able to steal your password, although it could potentially access other private information."

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